

08/04/21 Wednesday

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White House Says WHO's Call to Prioritize Vaccination Over Booster Shots is 'False Choice' by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The White House dismissed suggestions by the World Health Organization (WHO) on Wednesday that it's more important to get basic COVID-19 vaccination to more people than to focus on delivering third booster shots to those who've already been vaccinated. According to Press Secretary Jen Psaki, the US can "do both."

Earlier on Wednesday, WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom [Ghebreyesus advised](#) "a moratorium on boosters until at least the end of September to enable at least 10% of the population of every country to be vaccinated," as [data published by Pfizer](#) last week suggested a third dose of its two-shot SARS-CoV-2 vaccine could provide additional protection against "breakthrough" cases of the Delta variant of COVID-19.

"We definitely feel that it's a false choice and we can do both," Psaki told reporters at the White House on Wednesday.

"Also in this country [we] have enough supply to ensure that every American has access to a vaccine," she added. "We will have enough supply to ensure if the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] decides that boosters are recommended for a portion of the population to provide those as well. We believe we can do both and we don't need to make that choice."

While the US is capable of delivering a third vaccine dose to its citizens in the administration's estimation, Psaki cautioned that is not presently part of the plan.

"What we've been conveying to officials around the country who have implemented" giving third booster shots "in some places is that this is not in alignment with the guidance of public health officials, whether that is the CDC or the FDA, and we are certainly in touch with local officials on the matter and conveying exactly that," Psaki said Wednesday. "We also at the same time are prepared if the FDA decides that they are going to recommend a booster. That is why we ordered the number of doses we did order several months ago."

Earlier this week, Germany and the United Kingdom [both announced](#) they would begin giving selected, vulnerable groups booster shots to better guard against the Delta variant.

The US [government has bought](#) a total of 1.5 billion shots from a variety of vaccine manufacturers, enough to give 750 million people a two-dose SARS-CoV-2 vaccination course. The US population is just 330 million. [According to the US](#) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 401 million shots have been delivered to pharmacies and medical institutions across the country and 347 million of them have been administered; in other words, 192 million Americans have gotten one dose of the vaccine and 165 million have gotten both shots or the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

However, the US' pace of vaccination is ahead of most of the world. While just under 50% of the US population is vaccinated against COVID-19, on the continent of Africa that number [is barely 1.6%](#). Ghebreyesus noted on Wednesday that 80% of the 4 billion doses administered globally

"have gone to high- and upper-middle income countries, even though they account for less than half of the world's population."

The WHO chief [warned last month](#) that the growing disparity was leading to a "two-track pandemic - the haves are opening up, while the have-nots are locking down."

While the US has since announced a decision to [buy 500 million Pfizer](#) vaccines and donate them to poorer nations through next year, it was [heavily criticized earlier](#) this year for "hoarding" by nations like China, which has donated or sold abroad almost as many vaccines as it has delivered to its own citizens. Other First World nations, such as the UK and Israel, have similarly bought many times their population's worth of vaccines.

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It's Not Enough to Restore Eviction Protections, Biden Must Cancel Unpaid Pandemic Rents, Too

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

On Tuesday, popular pressure won out over threats by the US Supreme Court and the Biden administration re-imposed a moratorium on evictions for another 60 days, protecting many Americans behind on rent from losing their homes until October 3. However, the Court is sure to act quickly against this defiance.

With a new wave of COVID-19 cases rapidly increasing in the US, this victory, while for the moment averting disaster for millions of poor Americans, is ephemeral at best. If we are to truly protect Americans from a tsunami of evictions caused by pandemic-related lockdowns, US President Joe Biden must also cancel the rents.

The White House initially waffled on the issue of extending the moratorium, having been told by Associate Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh in a [late June ruling](#) that he would oppose any further extension of the ban if done by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), providing a crucial fifth vote to strike down the order. However, with Congress heading into a seven-week summer recess having never attempted to pass such a law, activists and local residents joined Rep. Cori Bush's (D-MO) occupation-style protest outside the Capitol building to demand the ban be extended past July 31. Although it drew many opportunistic Democratic lawmakers previously unmotivated to lift a finger for indebted lessees, it also grabbed the attention of some of the nation's greatest civil rights leaders, including Revs. Jesse Jackson and William Barber, and succeeded in its goal, convincing Biden to reverse course on August 3.

Meanwhile, police forces across the country made preparations for removing families from their homes as soon as possible. In the Atlanta metro area alone, landlords had filed for [75,000 evictions](#) between the spring of 2020 and spring of 2021; in [South Carolina, 7,000](#) were filed in roughly the same time period; in [Phoenix, 30,000](#); in [North Carolina, 87,000](#). You get the picture. In St. Louis, Missouri, where no state ban gave renters any further protection, the [sheriff's office said](#) it had already laid out plans for executing nine evictions per day beginning on August 9.

The ban prevented these and many more from going forward, but only on the narrow basis that making people homeless during a pandemic increases the risks of infection and transmission - the CDC didn't ban evictions on the grounds that eviction is inherently wrong and a violation of [Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), which affirms:

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

The [ban is "targeted."](#) confined by an agency definition of "substantial" or "high" rates of community transmission levels of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the deadly COVID-19 illness. In other words, as cases decline, these protections could disappear well before the October 3 deadline - and that's assuming the order survives the Supreme Court, which, judging by White House Press Secretary [Jen Psaki's comments](#) Wednesday, the administration has no more confidence in now than it did when it [said two days ago](#) it had no legal path forward. Instead, I propose the poisonous weed of evictions be dug up by the root: cancel the rent debts altogether. Like [student loan forgiveness](#), this task could be a simple executive order, justified by the extraordinary crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Up to 11 million Americans are threatened with eviction at present, and with many deeply in debt and the [\\$46 billion in federal aid](#) set aside for them being disbursed as a pace that would make a snail blush, it seems unlikely a substantial number of those people will be in changed circumstances come October. However, cancelling the rents isn't a new idea: since the lockdowns began in March 2020, [activists across the country](#) recognized the catastrophe in the making and elevated demands for rent cancellation for the duration of the pandemic. Bereft of jobs, [renters struck](#), refusing to pay landlords with money they didn't have.

Many state and local governments implemented equivalent programs for businesses and homeowners, recognizing that their mass collapse would be a social disaster. Yet renters, who [make up 34.7%](#) of homes, were given no such life raft, just their eviction being forestalled until after the outbreak was contained and months of unpayable debt had piled up.

The National Apartment Association landlord advocacy group [lamented last week](#) that with the eviction ban in place, they had been "left to shoulder" an estimated \$73 billion in rent debt. Minus the \$46 billion already appropriated by the federal government for emergency rental assistance, that leaves just \$26.6 billion for Biden to deal with - equivalent to a misplaced decimal point in the massive infrastructure, defense, and other spending bills Biden's administration is negotiating through Congress.

In other words, it's no great chore for a country ready to spend trillions on war and corporate largesse to save millions of its most vulnerable people from being thrown out into the cold. Biden must cancel the rents!

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Videos: IDF Aircraft Bomb Sites in Southern Lebanon in Response to Earlier Rockets
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Hours after Israel shelled positions in southern Lebanon in response to several rocket launches, jet aircraft were reported flying over the area carrying out airstrikes early Thursday morning. The airstrikes were [allegedly confirmed](#) by media belonging to Hezbollah, a Shiite militant group that controls much of southern Lebanon and has fought several wars against Israel in the past. There was no news of casualties or damage caused by the strikes, [which hit sites](#) in Al-Khiam, Kafr Kila and Alaishiyeh.

Videos filmed as the jets roared overhead captured several of the strikes.

The Israeli Defense Forces [also confirmed](#) the strikes, saying they were against "infrastructure used for terrorism," including the areas from which rockets had been launched at Israel on Wednesday.

"IDF attacks will continue and even intensify in the face of terrorist attempts against the State of Israel and its citizens," the statement continued. "The State of Lebanon is responsible for what happens in its territory. The IDF warns of continued attempts to harm Israeli citizens and their sovereignty."

The IDF also posted a video of two of the strikes shot by infrared camera.

On Wednesday afternoon, [three rockets](#) were fired from southern Lebanon toward the Israeli villages of Kiryat Shmona, Kfar Giladi, and Tel Hai, which sit near the Blue Line de facto border between the two countries. While one sparked a brush fire, no casualties were reported. In response, the IDF fired three bursts of artillery fire into southern Lebanon.

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Boston Mayor Compares Vaccine Proof Mandate to Freedom Papers Required of Blacks During Slavery

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Boston's mayor has shut down suggestions the city would follow New York's example, saying requiring proof of COVID-19 vaccination for people to participate in public indoor activities followed a long history of minorities "needing to show their papers."

"There's a long history in this country of people needing to show their papers," acting Boston Mayor Kim Janey said on Wednesday, "during slavery, post-slavery, as recent as, you know, what the immigrant population has to go through."

"We've heard Trump with the birth certificate nonsense. Here, we want to make sure that we are not doing anything that would further create a barrier for residents of Boston or disproportionately impact BIPOC [Black, indigenous, and other people of color] communities," she added, according to the [Boston Herald](#).

Janey's comment is an oblique reference to the ["freedom papers"](#) Free Black Americans were forced to carry with them at all times during the era of slavery before its abolition in 1865, which proved they weren't runaway slaves and which they were required to produce on demand. Without them, Free Blacks risked being arrested and enslaved. Janey is Boston's first Black and

first female mayor, having taken office in March after then-Mayor Marty [Walsh was appointed](#) to head the US Department of Labor.

Her remarks come after New York City Mayor [Bill de Blasio said](#) on Tuesday that the nation's largest city would require proof they had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine from people before they could participate in indoor dining, fitness and entertainment venues in the city. He called it the "Key to NYC Pass."

"'The key to New York City.' When you hear those words, I want you to imagine the notion that because someone is vaccinated, they can do all the amazing things that are available in New York City," [de Blasio said](#) at a press conference. "This is a miraculous place, literally full of wonders, and if you're vaccinated, all that's gonna open up to you. You'll have the key, you can open the door."

"But if you're unvaccinated, unfortunately, you will not be able to participate in many things," he added.

The week prior, [de Blasio also announced](#) that all 340,000 municipal workers would be required to either get vaccinated against COVID-19 or submit to weekly COVID-19 testing.

De Blasio's initiative comes amid a flagging vaccination drive in the US, where nationwide daily shots have declined from a high of 4.4 million per day in mid-April to just 682,000 on July 30, [according to the US](#) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data. On Tuesday, the US hit US President Joe Biden's [goal of 70% vaccination](#) for the adult population, albeit a month after Biden aimed for it, and just under 50% of the US population has been vaccinated overall. In some parts of the country, vaccine hesitancy is widespread, with [28 of 50 states](#) having less than 50% of their population vaccinated. The lowest states, including Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas, have just 35% of their population vaccinated and rates have stagnated.

According to the [latest data for Boston](#), which dates to July 27, 60.6% of the city's 692,000 people have been fully vaccinated.

While the Biden administration has blamed "misinformation" for the stalled vaccination campaign and urged social media platforms to more tightly regulate vaccine-related content, more quietly, the federal government has also provided [some \\$100 million](#) to rural health clinics for outreach services to "improve health literacy" and address community members' concerns about the vaccines.

A [Gallup poll conducted](#) in June found that 20% of vaccine-hesitant respondents were open to persuasion, while 51% said they were not at all likely to reconsider their position in light of new information. An earlier poll conducted in March by the analytics company found that 23% of hesitant people wanted to wait until the vaccine was confirmed to be safe, and another 16% said they were specifically concerned about how quickly the vaccines had been developed and another 10% were either allergic or afraid of an allergic reaction to the vaccine.

At the other end, Gallup also found that people not getting vaccinated was Americans' greatest fear about the pandemic, with 53% of respondents saying so.

Following Janey's comments on Wednesday, some Bostonians raised their voices in criticism. City Councilor Andrea Campbell, who is running against the acting mayor in the November election, said, "When we are combating a deadly virus & vaccine hesitancy, this kind of rhetoric is dangerous."

"Showing proof of vaccination is not slavery or birtherism," [Campbell tweeted](#). "We are too close to give ground to COVID. Science is science. It's pretty simple - vax up and mask up."

Michelle Wu, another of Janey's election rivals, even more explicitly came out in favor of a solution like de Blasio's, saying that "anyone in a position of leadership should be using that position to build trust in vaccines."

City Council President Pro Tempore Matt O'Malley made his own [statement on Tuesday](#), tweeting a link to a New York Times story about de Blasio's initiative, saying "we should be doing this in Boston."

Janey isn't the only politician to be criticized for how she objected to vaccination cards or other government COVID-19 safety measures, either: US Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) has repeatedly been raked over the coals for her numerous [comparisons to the Holocaust](#). She apologized for doing so in June and visited the Holocaust Memorial Museum in recompense, but just weeks later resumed her old habit.

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Israel's Twitter Page Arouses Fury After Video Boasts of Water Management Accomplishments by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Since 1967, Palestinians in the West Bank have been legally barred from sinking their own wells without a permit from the Israeli military, forcing them to buy water at inflated prices from Israeli water providers.

Twitter users are calling attention to the truth behind Israel's water management system after the State of Israel's official Twitter account posted a video boasting of its skill in the field.

"Over the years, Israel has had to develop technologies and methods in order to preserve, conserve, and protect their water supply for the benefit of their people," the video's host says. Posted on Sunday, the video names five water management systems Israel uses to "miraculously" get enough water in the arid region: recycling of used wastewater; drip irrigation; desalination of seawater; river rehabilitation; and moisture condensers used to pull water from humidity in the air.

The claim that Jewish settlers "made the desert bloom," as former Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol put it, is both a long-standing theme of Zionism and a cornerstone of Israel's public diplomacy talking points. However, this time, Twitter users weren't falling for it. They began to point out the other side of the story - the one where Israel deprives its neighbors, as well as Palestinians under its rule, of an equivalent amount of water.

"'Drawing water out of thin air' is an interesting way of saying 'cutting off Palestinian communities from aquifers and diverting that water to illegal settlements,'" [one user wrote](#).

"By stealing Syria's Golan Heights, rich in water, oil and occupied illegally since 1967," replied journalist [Richard Medhurst](#), who noted that as much as one-third of Israel's water supply comes from the Golan, an area of highlands giving Israel control over parts of the Yarmouk River, most of the Jordan River and the entire Sea of Galilee.

"By maintaining an apartheid system where settlers water their lawns while Palestinians are parched," was the [reply by Ariel Gold](#), national co-director of anti-war activist group Code Pink.

Political cartoonist Carlos Latuff replied with a drawing showing a water pipe delivering a slow drip to a Palestinian pail while an Israeli bather's bathtub overflows with water.

As Latuff's cartoon notes, Amnesty International has condemned Israel's "discriminatory" water practices, [calling it in 2017](#) one of the "most devastating consequences" of Israel's "50-year occupation of the Palestinian territories."

According to the nongovernmental organization, in November 1967, months after Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, and Golan Heights in the Six-Day War, Tel Aviv issued Military Order 158, which said Palestinians could not construct any new water installations without first being given a permit by the Israeli Defense Forces.

"While restricting Palestinian access to water, Israel has effectively developed its own water infrastructure and water network in the West Bank for the use of its own citizens in Israel and in the settlements - that are illegal under international law," AI further noted. "The Israeli state-owned water company Mekorot has systematically sunk wells and tapped springs in the occupied West Bank to supply its population, including those living in illegal settlements with water for domestic, agricultural and industrial purposes. While Mekorot sells some water to Palestinian water utilities, the amount is determined by the Israeli authorities."

"As a result of continuous restrictions, many Palestinian communities in the West Bank have no choice but to purchase water brought in by trucks at a much high prices ranging from 4 to 10 USD per cubic metre. In some of the poorest communities, water expenses can, at times, make up half of a family's monthly income," the report continued.

Last month, Bassam Sawalhi, an engineer with the Jerusalem Water Undertaking, [told Al Jazeera](#) that some Palestinian villages in the West Bank only get water once every 15 days, and that while the average quantity of water per person used by Palestinians was already dramatically less than Israeli communities in the area, Mekorot had redirected even more of their water to the Jewish settlements.

Israeli news outlet [Ha'aretz also reported](#) last month that in the wake of the 11-day war in Gaza in May that left 254 Palestinians and 13 Israelis dead, the isolated territory has been unable to carry out urgently-needed repairs to its already-fragile water system due to Israeli rules about what equipment can enter. Israeli human rights NGO [B'Tselem noted last year](#) that due to widespread contamination and almost-nonexistent treatment facilities, 96.2% of household water pumped from Gaza's only aquifer is unfit for human consumption, and 40% of the water that is pumped is lost due to crumbling infrastructure.

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Four New York DAs Request Evidence From Cuomo Probe, Hinting at Possible Criminal Charges

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Independent investigators appointed by New York Attorney General Letitia James (D) determined on Tuesday that New York Governor Andrew Cuomo (D) sexually harassed several

women "by engaging in unwanted groping, kissing, and hugging, and making inappropriate comments." US President Joe Biden and other Democratic heavyweights have demanded he resign.

The district attorney's offices of Westchester County, Manhattan, Albany, and Nassau County have announced they are formally seeking evidence from the New York AG in an effort to determine whether [Cuomo's alleged conduct](#) amounts to criminal charges in the respective districts.

"As some of the Governor's conduct described in the report occurred in Westchester County, we have formally requested investigative materials obtained by the AG's Office," Westchester County District Attorney Mimi Rocah said in a statement. "As this is an ongoing investigation, we will not comment further at this time."

According to James' 168-page investigative report, Rocah's probe will focus primarily on a New York State trooper assigned to the Protective Services Unit (PSU) of the New York Governor. The trooper, who described Cuomo as generally "flirtatious" and "creepy," was first spotted by the New York Governor at an event on the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge. Soon after, Cuomo recommended she join the PSU, despite lacking the mandatory minimum requirement of serving as a State Trooper for three years. The requirement was later "changed specifically to accommodate" the trooper.

The trooper recounted a number of instances in which the New York Governor made inappropriate and/or offensive comments and interactions, including an incident that occurred on September 23, 2019.

"As the Governor walked by Trooper #1, he ran the palm of his left hand across her stomach in the direction opposite the direction that he was walking," the report detailed. "The center of the Governor's hand was on Trooper #1's belly button, and he pushed his hand back to her right hip where she kept her gun"

"I felt ... the palm of his hand on my belly button and ... pushed back toward my right hip where my gun is ... I would say [the belly button] was probably in ... the center of his palm," she said, per the report, expressing that she felt "completely violated because to me, like that's between my chest and my privates."

Cuomo denied ever purposely touching the woman on her stomach, and asserted that the trooper was assigned to the PSU because he "was on constant alert to recruit more women, Blacks, and Asians to the state police detail." The New York Governor also testified to independent investigators that he may have kissed the officer on the cheek during a Christmas party.

Danny Frost, a spokesperson for the office of Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance, confirmed via Twitter that his office issued a request for the investigative materials related to "incidents that occurred in Manhattan."

Albany County District Attorney David Soares, whose office also requested material from the probe on Tuesday, revealed to NBC's Lester Holt that a formal complaint, which is required to pursue criminal charges, has yet to be filed with his office. However, Soares still intends to pursue an investigation that will be done "expeditiously."

"We welcome any victim to contact our office with additional information," Soares [said in a separate statement](#).

Nassau County District Attorney Joyce Smith, who was sworn into office less than two months prior, [also confirmed](#) the "deeply disturbing findings" within the NY AG's independent investigation will be reviewed, as the office has also issued a request for James' NY records. Though the NY AG declared that the [actions of Cuomo and his Executive Chamber](#) violated multiple state and federal laws, her office has declined to prosecute at this moment. However, the report was issued to the New York State Assembly, which holds the power to impeach the governor.

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At Least 10 Migrant Workers Dead, 12 Injured After Van Tips Over in Southern Texas
by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Wednesday, a van transporting more than two dozen migrants lost control and flipped after striking a curb in Brooks County, Texas, approximately 80 miles from the state's border with Mexico.

At least 10 migrants were killed in the accident, and more than 12 others were reportedly injured, according to the Associated Press, citing Sgt. Nathan Brandley of the Texas Department of Public Safety.

Brooks County Sheriff Benny Martinez confirmed that the driver was among the deceased at the scene.

Based on preliminary findings, authorities believe the driver of the van was speeding and failed to turn at the appropriate time, causing the individual to lose control and ultimately flip the van, which is top-heavy.

The Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) shared some photos of the incident with media and confirmed 9 passengers plus the driver died.

The fatal accident is believed to have crashed just south of Encino, Texas, around 4:20 p.m. local time. The site is approximately 10 miles south of the Falfurrias Border Patrol Station.

Despite the driver's presumed speed in the van, the vehicle was not involved in a pursuit, authorities said. It is believed the van was overcapacity, as Martinez estimated the vehicle to be a 15-person van.

A number of injured individuals are being airlifted to hospitals in the Rio Grande Valley.

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Biden Administration Approves First Arms Sale to Taiwan
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Late last year, the Chinese Foreign Ministry imposed sanctions on several US defense contractors, including Lockheed Martin, after learning then-US President Donald Trump's administration approved an arms sale to Taiwan valued at \$1.8 billion.

The US Department of State has approved a possible \$750 million arms sale to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) for dozens of 155mm M109A6 Paladin Medium Self-Propelled Howitzer Systems and related equipment, the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency [announced in a Wednesday news release](#). In addition to 40 Medium Self-Propelled Howitzer Systems, TECRO has requested to purchase 20 M992A2 Field Artillery Ammunition Support Vehicles, five M88A2 Hercules vehicles, five M2 Chrysler Mount .50 caliber machine guns, 1,698 multi-option, Precision Guidance Kits and a single Advanced Field Artillery Tactical Data System (AFATDS).

[Raytheon's AFATDS](#) is a software-based fire control and battlefield management system presently utilized by the US military forces.

The release highlights that the proposed sale of the Paladin Medium Self-Propelled Howitzer Systems will assist Taiwan in the modernization of its howitzer fleet, "enhancing its ability to meet current and future threats."

Details of the possible arms sale have been forwarded to Congress, which will conduct its own review.

Furthermore, BAE Systems - provider of the howitzers - has to enter into negotiations with Taiwan before the sale can be finalized

Taiwan's defense ministry applauded the Biden Administration's progress on the matter, arguing on Twitter that the arms sale "enables the country to maintain robust self-defense, & regional peace & stability."

The proposal comes as a continuation of what the US defines as its commitment to the [Taiwan Relations Act](#) - a 1979 pledge to assist in maintaining "peace security and stability" in the Western Pacific.

As the US and Taiwan progress, it is likely that China will issue a rebuke, and invoke sanctions against the US-based contractors involved in the sale.

Per the 'One China policy,' Beijing has maintained that Taiwan is its province, and those conducting arms sales to Taiwan are viewed as meddling in Beijing's internal affairs. China is especially uneasy over Taiwan's cooperation with the US in the defense sector.

The United States is increasingly concerned with China's growing military power in the Indo-Pacific region and strives to scale up its presence there. In June, media reported that the US Defense Department was mulling a deployment of a permanent naval task force in the Pacific.

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NY Mayor Calls for Criminal Charges Against Cuomo as Prosecutors Seek Evidence From Harassment Probe
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In light of the recent findings from an independent investigation ordered by the New York Attorney General's Office, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo has been called to resign from his

post after the probe determined that he allegedly made numerous sexual advances on aides throughout his governorship. He has denied the accusation and refused to resign.

As a chorus of US lawmakers and state officials have urged New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo to step down from his post, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has doubled down and called for the governor to be criminally charged for sexually harassing nearly a dozen current and former staffers.

Appearing on "CBS This Morning" early Wednesday, de Blasio told show hosts Gayle King and Anthony Mason, as well as lead national correspondent David Begnaud, that Cuomo needed to be subjected to the full extent of the law.

"If you assault a woman, you do something against her will sexually, that's criminal," de Blasio told Begnaud when asked about potential criminal charges. "And the Albany County district attorney is looking at that, and I think he should be charged."

"The whole thing has been so painful. When you read this report - 11 women systematically wronged, 11 women affronted by a powerful guy who could crush their career and their reputation, and he's the kind of guy that everyone assumes would if you crossed them," he added.

The findings detailed throughout the 168-page report included various instances of "unwelcome and nonconsensual touching" that Cuomo carried out during his governorship in addition to encounters in which he made sexually suggestive remarks to female staffers. Announcing the report's conclusions, New York Attorney General Letitia James described the report as being riddled with "deeply disturbing" revelations.

One piece of [evidence](#) released by James included a selfie that included Cuomo and an aide only identified as "Executive Assistant #1." That photo is said to have been taken shortly before Cuomo proceeded to allegedly grope the woman as the pair were working in his office at the Governor's Mansion on New Year's Eve in 2019.

Cuomo has [adamantly denied](#) any and all sexual harassment allegations, having questionably explained that his touchy-feely embraces with others is rooted in "cultural" and "generational" differences. In fact, Cuomo's pre-recorded response to the report included a variety of photos in which he was either kissing or closely embracing prominent figures, including former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former President Barack Obama. That same content was included in an [85-page rebuttal](#) released by Cuomo later Tuesday.

To this effect, de Blasio shot down the explanation when it was referenced by King. "Putting your hand up a woman's shirt and touching their breast is not generational. I know plenty of guys who are older who would never in a million years do that," he stated matter-of-factly.

"I absolutely believe he must resign for the good of New York state and our people. If he doesn't, the clamor, which is universal at this point [from both] Democrats and Republicans, saying he's gotta go is going to win the day. If he wants to wait for impeachment, he can, but it's coming soon in our state legislature," he underscored.

De Blasio's call for criminal charges to be issued against Cuomo [came a day](#) after he joined the chorus of individuals pushing for the governor to either resign or be impeached by the state legislature.

Tuesday's development prompted [similar calls](#) by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and US President Joe Biden, who himself has been previously accused of [sexual misconduct](#).

District Attorneys Request Evidence From Cuomo Probe

As de Blasio briefly mentioned during the Wednesday appearance, New York district attorneys have already begun the process of submitting a request for evidence stemming from the independent investigation ordered by James' office.

Early on after the report was released, Albany County District Attorney David Soares confirmed on Tuesday that his office was opening a criminal investigation into the Cuomo revelations. In [remarks](#) to "NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt," Soares remarked that his office has an "obligation" to conduct its own full investigation to determine whether criminal behavior was indeed committed.

[Similarly](#), district attorneys in Manhattan, Nassau County and Westchester County have launched their own such inquiries after the Tuesday-released report detailed incidents that may have occurred in each prosecutors' jurisdiction.

The investigation by the New York Attorney General's Office into Cuomo's behavior initially began in March after allegations of sexual harassment surfaced in late 2020.

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Biden Administration May Soon Reportedly Require All US-Bound Travelers to Be Fully Vaccinated

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Current restrictions implemented by the US amid the COVID-19 pandemic have seen travel limitation imposed on individuals transiting from countries including China, the UK, Brazil and South Africa, among several other nations.

The White House is reportedly weighing the possibility of mandating that all visitors to the United States be fully vaccinated, marking the latest efforts by the Biden administration to clamp down on rising COVID-19 cases.

Citing an unidentified White House official, Reuters reported on Wednesday that the Biden White House is "developing a plan" that would require all US-bound foreign travelers to verify that they have indeed been vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The mandate would reportedly be in exchange for eventually lifting travel restrictions currently in place for certain countries. The official described the efforts as "a phased approach that over time will mean, with limited exceptions, that foreign nationals traveling to the United States [from all countries] need to be fully vaccinated."

At present, CDC [travel restrictions](#) have been implemented for travelers coming from China, Iran, the UK, Brazil, South Africa and India. Additionally, various European nations such as Austria, Germany, France and Italy have been outlined under COVID-19 travel limitations. However, the White House official did relay to the outlet that the Biden administration is not entirely ready to lift travel restrictions on account of the rising COVID-19 cases, which have been skyrocketing in states like Florida and Texas. In fact, both states have been accounting for one-third of all of the US' latest spike in novel coronavirus cases.

The COVID-19 delta variant is presently accounting for the majority of cases across the US, with figures placing it in the ballpark of 93% of infections. The highly-contagious strain, which was first reported in India in October 2020, became the most dominant variant within the US within a span of just two months.

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Hot Mess Summer: Spirit Airlines Leaves US Passengers Stranded as Company Rattled With IT Issues

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The low-cost airliner has been undergoing severe operational setbacks over the last several days that have left thousands of passengers stranded without any indication that a solution from the company is in sight. It's unclear when the situation may truly be remedied.

Ultra-low-cost American airliner Spirit Airlines has marked another day of hardship after it was forced to cancel the majority of its scheduled flights on Wednesday as a result of staffing shortages and outages that have riddled the company's system.

Figures provided by flight tracking service FlightAware have indicated that Spirit Airlines called off some 60% of its scheduled flights, a tally that accounts for the majority of canceled flights within the US on Wednesday.

The latest cancellations come on top of scrubbed flights that have been ongoing since at least Sunday, when passengers were starting to endure setbacks that were brought on by weather-related delays, technology outages and staffing shortages.

In fact, Sunday saw about 60% of Spirit Airlines' flights canceled, with another 42% of flights called off that following Monday. On Tuesday, another 61% of scheduled flights were a no-go. Although Spirit has apologized for the massive delays that have forced thousands to wait out in packed airport terminals and baggage areas, the apologies have largely fallen flat as many customers have since lashed out against the company.

"Can't wait to have a lovely discussion with @SpiritAirlines when I get back home," netizen Kimberly Jones wrote in a Wednesday [Twitter post](#). "Thanks for cancelling my flight and then providing a \$50 voucher as if that takes care of this craziness you have put us through."

Another Twitter user [detailed](#) that they missed their flight to Las Vegas, Nevada, after having to book an alternative flight with Spirit. "Thank you @SpiritAirlines for cancelling all flights and not responding to my calls/texts/emails about my refund. Can't wait to be apart [sic] of the class action lawsuit coming your way," they wrote.

While Wednesday has seen more of the same cancellations, Spirit Airlines has also revealed that it will be seeing the number of scrubbed flights "progressively drop in the days to come."

In a [statement](#) given to The Hill, the airliner explained that the staffing shortages emerged after encountering issues with the company's scheduling system, and that a network reboot would soon enough remedy the situation.

The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, the union that represents flight attendants working for Spirit Airlines, has confirmed that it met with airline officials to address the staffing issues,

emphasizing that it reached an agreement encouraging staff to pick up additional flight shifts to ease flight backups.

The union also noted in a [Wednesday statement](#) that "in an operational breakdown like this, the airline needs to 'reset' in order to recover quicker and prevent further disruptions that could last weeks," before adding that the incoming network reboot "will see significant cancellations in the short term but avoid long term disruptions."

Claims had been initially swirling that the delays were prompted by a mass exodus of staff. However, those allegations have been thrown out by the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, which [explained](#) on Monday that the claim is "incorrect," and that "crews are not the issue."

The culprit in the end was the technical snag that prevented crews from accessing the airline's scheduling system, leaving staffers unsure of what flights they were meant to cover.

Similar cancellations were also experienced by American Airlines, however, it was not to the severe extent that was dealt on Spirit Airlines. American Airlines issued about 118 cancellations due to severe storms that hit the Texas area.

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Biden Signs Memorandum Giving Temporary Safe Haven to Hong Kong Residents - White House

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has signed a memorandum that provides a temporary safe haven to the residents of Hong Kong, the White House spokesperson Jen Psaki announced on Thursday.

"Today, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. signed a memorandum directing the deferral of removal of certain Hong Kong residents who are present in the United States, giving them a temporary safe haven," the statement said.

The move demonstrates Biden's "strong support for people in Hong Kong in the face of ongoing repression by the People's Republic of China (PRC), and makes clear we will not stand idly by as the PRC breaks its promises to Hong Kong and to the international community," it added.

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US Intelligence Digging Through Genetic Data to Uncover Origins of COVID-19 - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The US intelligence agencies are investigating the genetic data that could be a key to revealing the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, CNN reported on Thursday, citing multiple people familiar with the matter.

In May, US President Joe Biden directed the US Intelligence Community to redouble efforts to investigate the origins of COVID-19 and to report their findings to him in 90 days. The intelligence services that have insisted that there is insufficient evidence to assess whether

COVID-19 came from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory leak, are expected to reach out to China on this issue.

According to CNN, the data contain the genetic blueprints drawn from virus samples that were studied at the lab in Wuhan, and some of the officials believe that these samples may have been the source of the outbreak. It is yet unclear how the US intelligence agencies acquired the data, which is still to be deciphered, the report said. Sources say that there is a possibility that the data were hacked.

To analyze such a huge amount of data, the US intelligence is reportedly using supercomputers at the National Labs with the Department of Energy. They also employ the help of Mandarin-speaking specialists since the data are in Chinese.

"Obviously there are scientists who are [security] cleared. But Mandarin-speaking ones who are cleared? That's a very small pool. And not just any scientists, but ones who specialize in bio? So you can see how this quickly becomes difficult," one source familiar with the intelligence said.

In March, the WHO issued the first report of its fact-finding mission to China, which came to the conclusion that the possibility of the virus having leaked from a state laboratory in Wuhan was very low. The experts said that there was a high possibility that the virus was transmitted to humans from bats through another animal.

China has denied claims of a lab leak and urged the US and its allies to stop politicizing the issue. Beijing has also affirmed its commitment to finding the truth behind the origins of the virus with global partners based on a scientific approach.

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US June Trade Deficit Up \$4.8Bln to \$75.7Bln - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, Aug 4 (Sputnik) - The US international trade deficit rose by \$4.8 billion from a month earlier to reach \$75.7 billion in June, data from the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis showed on Thursday.

The BEA said exports in June were at \$207.7 billion. But imports grew even more, to \$283.4 billion, resulting in the deficit.

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Biden to Set Goal of 50% Electric Vehicles Sales by 2030 on Thursday – White House

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) – The US President Joe Biden later in the day will sign an executive order setting a new goal of reaching at least 50 percent of electric vehicles sales share by 2030, White House said on Thursday.

"The President will sign an Executive Order that sets an ambitious new target to make half of all new vehicles sold in 2030 zero-emissions vehicles, including battery electric, plug-in hybrid electric, or fuel cell electric vehicles," White House said in a release.

The new executive order will also pave the way for the development of long-term fuel efficiency and emissions standards which are expected to deliver around \$140 billion in net benefits, save nearly 200 billion gallons of gasoline, and provide average net consumer benefits of up to \$900 during the life of the vehicle in fuel savings, the release said.

The new program is in line with Biden's commitment to put climate change at the front and center of his administration, setting an ambitious goal to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent from 2005 levels by the end of this decade. Biden has also pushed for electric vehicle charging stations, offshore wind development and other clean energy production.

In 2020, a total of 761,000 hybrid electric, plug-in hybrid-electric, and electric vehicles were sold in the US, less than half a percent of the total number of vehicles sold, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims at 385,000 as COVID Headwinds Ease Slightly - Labor Dept

WASHINGTON, Aug 4 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims dipped below the key 400,000 mark last week according to Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested a modest labor market recovery amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending July 31, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 385,000, a decrease of 14,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a statement.

The previous week's level was revised down by 1,000 from 400,000 to 399,000.

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RPT: FEATURE - New Yorkers on New Covid Mandate: 'Vaccinate or Die'

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - As the Delta virus continues to spread across the United States some New York City residents are not buying any objections to the government mandating that businesses ask for proof of vaccination.

On Tuesday, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, while announcing the mandate - the first of its kind in the nation - said New Yorkers must vaccinate if they want to "participate in society fully."

The new measure requires all customers to show proof of vaccination to enter a variety of businesses including indoor restaurants, gyms, and movie theaters, to name just a few.

Many other local jurisdictions have imposed mask and vaccine mandates, but New York City is the first to demand proof. The move comes as virus cases nationwide are up 500 percent from a

month ago, largely due to the Delta variant, which makes up 93% of all new cases, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Critics have raised civil liberty and abuse of power concerns, but three New Yorkers believe the rule is a must, despite these issues, because not to vaccinate puts too many lives at risk and would be irresponsible. Moreover, all are adamantly opposed to any misinformation that continues to fuel vaccine hesitancy.

"I like the idea of a mandate because the past year has been horrible with us being locked down for a very long time," Queens resident Michelle Frankson told Sputnik. "New York was the epicenter. We lost a lot of people. I initially didn't want to take the vaccine but I took it in April because I wanted to get back to living. I've been slowly dipping my toe, getting involved in more activities."

Frankson, a retired veteran and educator, said all Americans have a responsibility to protect themselves and those around them.

"I still wear a mask. I think it's unfair for those of us who have complied, gotten the vaccination and done the right thing to, at this point, be endangered by those people who aren't thinking about their community. It's not fair," she said soberly. "The rest of us have shouldered the responsibility. To tell people we're good, then now go back and say we have to start wearing masks again, that's difficult to deal with."

Noted psychologist, educator and New York resident Dr. Jeff Gaudere said Americans face unique dangers because of COVID-19, the explosion of the Delta variant and the reluctance of a significant swathe to be vaccinated.

"Until people understand that we have a responsibility to people and their families and not only to ourselves, we'll be in greater danger," said Dr. Gaudere, known as "America's Psychologist," who has a private practice in Harlem. "We're one of the few countries in the world with more shots than people but people are not taking advantage. For them it's about individual rights."

While he said he understands the fear citizens may have about government overreach and their distrust of institutions, Dr. Gaudere said it is vitally important for everyone to keep their eyes on the bigger picture.

"We're dealing with something that's absolutely extraordinary and outside of human function," he said. "It is a public health issue... I agree with the new mandate. But I understand the concerns people have about their freedom being taken away, vaccine hesitancy, the distrust Black people have of the medical community and instances of medical apartheid, which all puts them at risk. But at some point you have to stop the circle."

Dr. Gaudere, one of the most widely sought-after experts in the mental health field, said those experiencing vaccine hesitancy and others who have resolved not to get vaccinated are counting on other people to get the shots.

"Those who have taken the shot understand that they are responsible to the community and their families," he said.

The doctor predicted that politicians encouraging people not to get vaccinated will be on the "wrong side of history."

"Unfortunately, this mandate is the last resort but we're in a place now where if we don't crush the virus now, we will not have anything near the life we once had," he said. "It will be misery, death and long term effects."

Andrea Blackman-Morris, a Bronx resident and retired legal secretary, told Sputnik the requirement is "life-saving."

"They are asking you to save your life, save a child's life," Blackman-Morris said. "I find it very selfish the way people act."

Blackman-Morris said it's difficult to understand that self-centered, individualistic type of thinking, especially considering the death, devastation and the social, emotional, physical and economic toll the global pandemic has taken on families of the fallen.

"I'm exasperated by people's ignorance and all the misinformation that's out there," she said. "It was the same thing in the past when people were dealing with smallpox and polio. People need to talk to their doctor and forget all the stuff they see on Facebook. We have to do our part, do the right thing."

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Biden Nominates Mark Brzezinski to Be US Envoy to Poland - White House

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has nominated Mark Brzezinski to be the next US ambassador to Poland, the White House said in a press release.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate the following individuals to serve in key roles promoting US foreign policy and national security: Mark Brzezinski, Nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Poland," the release said on Wednesday.

Brzezinski served in the Obama administration as the US ambassador to Sweden from 2011 to 2015, the release said. He also served on former President Bill Clinton's National Security Council from 1999 to 2001, with a focus on Russia, Eurasia, and the Balkans, the release added.

However, according to the release, Brzezinski most recently spent his days as the founder and principal of Brzezinski Strategies LLC, which consults companies on long-term global investments. Brzezinski also spent some time as the managing director at Makena Capital Management.

Brzezinski is the son of the late Zbigniew Brzezinski, who served as former US President Jimmy Carter's National Security Adviser.

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Ten People Confirmed Dead After Van Transporting Migrants Crashes in Texas - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - Ten people are dead after a van transporting migrants crashed in south Texas, local newspaper The Monitor reported citing the Brooks County Sheriff. The report said on Wednesday that ten people died and about 25 others were injured when the van rolled over.

The driver of the vehicle died at the scene, the report added.

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US State Department Approves Possible \$750M In Arms Sale to Taiwan - Defense Agency

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved a possible \$750 million arms sale of artillery systems to Taiwan, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a statement..

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) of 155mm M109A6 Paladin Medium Self-Propelled Howitzer System and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$750 million," DSCA said on Wednesday.

TECRO, the diplomatic entity representing Taiwan, requested to buy 40 of the systems alongside 20 ammunition support vehicles, five armored recovery vehicles, five heavy machine

guns, and 1,698 Precision Guidance Kits that increase the accuracy of the 155mm howitzer rounds using GPS technology.

The State Department found that the proposed sale is consistent with US law, and would have no adverse impact on US defense readiness. The sale would serve US interests by modernizing the Taiwanese armed forces and maintaining the political stability, military balance, and economic progress in the region, DSCA added.

China has repeatedly objected to US arms sales to Taiwan. Taiwan has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan maintains that it is an autonomous country and has political and economic relations with several other nations.

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Huawei CFO Lawyer Says 'Bad Faith' US Repeatedly Mislead Canada Court on Extradition Bid

TORONTO, August 4 (Sputnik) - The United States repeatedly misled Canada's legal system on several key issues pertinent to the extradition proceedings against Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou, Mona Duckett, a member of the executive's legal team, argued in a British Columbia courtroom.

The last leg of the extradition hearings began on Wednesday, with lawyers for the Attorney General of Canada (AGC) and the Huawei executive expected to spar, between now and August 20, over allegations that US prosecutors manipulated the case against Meng.

"The requesting state's conduct has been egregious for five reasons," Duckett told British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Heather Holmes. "Number one, it is the court that has been misled; number two, on multiple occasions; number three, in relation to matters that are important or central."

Duckett emphasized the United States misinformed the court on issues that "favored committal" – a judge's decision deeming the legal procedure serious enough to bring evidence before the court – despite prosecutors knowing the true facts of the case.

The Canadian court was "tricked" by the United States to make the case against Meng seem stronger, Duckett added.

Meng's legal counsel said the United States was aware of evidence that suggested HSBC executives were cognizant of Huawei's control over a company that the Justice Department alleges was used to circumvent sanctions on Iran, which forms the basis for the fraud charges Meng is facing.

The US Justice Department alleges that Meng committed fraud by misleading HSBC into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014. Tehran-based Skycom is alleged to have acted as the shell company for Huawei in its transactions with Iran.

Last month, Holmes rejected Wanzhou's application to adduce documents from HSBC as supplementary evidence in the extradition hearings. In April, the High Court of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region ordered HSBC to release additional documents to the executive's

defense team and to Canadian government prosecutors. The defense attorney said that while the trove of HSBC documents was not adduced to the case, Holmes should, nevertheless, be cognizant of them.

Docket on multiple occasions emphasized that the United States had acted in "bad faith" and noted that no Canadian litigant could "get away" with the conduct the Justice Department had engaged in.

Meng's attorney also mentioned that while Canada is a party to the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, the United States is not and therefore is not bound by Article 26, which states "every treaty in force is binding upon the parties to it and must be performed by them in good faith."

Meng, the daughter of Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, was arrested on December 1, 2018 at Vancouver International Airport during a layover stop at the request of the US government.

Meng remains under house arrest in Vancouver, although is free to traverse the region in the company of state-imposed guards outside of her 11:00 p.m to 6:00 a.m. curfew.

The final arguments in the 18-month-long extradition process are expected to wrap up on August 20.

Holmes is expected to give her recommendation on United States' extradition request to AGC and Justice David Lametti later in the fall. Lametti has the final say on the request and has the right to refuse extradition in exceptional circumstances.

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UN Chief Welcomes ASEAN's Appointment of Brunei Diplomat as Envoy on Myanmar - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General welcomed the appointment by the ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) of Brunei's Second Minister of Foreign Affairs as Special Envoy on Myanmar, UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

"The Secretary-General welcomes the appointment of Mr. Erywan Yusof, Second Minister of Foreign Affairs of Brunei Darussalam as Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair on Myanmar," Dujarric said on Wednesday. "The United Nations looks forward to continuing its cooperation with ASEAN on a coherent response to the crisis in Myanmar."

Guterres renewed his call on Myanmar's military to respect the will of people and refrain from violence and repression, Dujarric said.

The UN chief also called to ensure full and unimpeded access to those in need of humanitarian assistance throughout the country.

"The United Nations is focusing its efforts, in cooperation with international and regional partners, notably ASEAN, to provide humanitarian and life-saving assistance," Dujarric added. On February 1, Myanmar's military overthrew the civilian government and declared a year-long state of emergency. The United Nations estimates that at least 930 civilians have been killed by the country's security forces since the coup.

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Dow Jones Falls Most in 2 Weeks as US Stocks Slide on Job Market Worries

NEW YORK, August 4 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street fell broadly on Wednesday, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average losing its most in two weeks, after an underwhelming private sector jobs report for June heightened worries about what the government would cite later in the week for total employment for July.

The Dow, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, closed down 324 points, or 0.9 percent, at 34,793. It was the index's sharpest one-day drop since July 19. The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, settled down 20 points, or 0.5 percent, at 4,403.

The tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite was the only major US equity index that bucked Wednesday's decline. Nasdaq, which groups Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, finished up a modest 19 points, or 0.1 percent, at 14,781.

Stocks fell broadly after the ADP National Employment Report showed a jobs gain of 330,000 in July versus expectations for 683,000 and against the June growth of 692,000.

The ADP report came ahead of the July non-farm payrolls data due from the Labor Department on Friday that would include jobs growth in both the private and public sectors.

"The deterioration to the short-term outlook was somewhat overdone given the ADP report has not been a consistent indicator of how well the private sector performs in the non-farm payroll report," Ed Moya, analyst at New York brokerage firm OANDA, said.

Economists have said they expect a non-farm payrolls growth of 870,000 in July versus the 850,000 in June.

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Whiskey Bottle Worth \$5,800 Gifted to Pompeo By Japan Gone Missing - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The US State Department said that it is conducting an inquiry into the disappearance of a whiskey bottle worth \$5,800 that the former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo received as a gift from the government of Japan in 2019.

As it appears from the list of gifts received by the US federal employees from the foreign sources in 2019, the bottle of whiskey was gifted to Pompeo on June 24 and its current location is unknown, the State Department said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the New York Times reported that Pompeo said he had no recollection of receiving the bottle of whiskey and did not know what happened to it as well as that there was an inquiry into its whereabouts. The report said it was unclear whether Pompeo did actually receive the bottle as he was traveling in Saudi Arabia on June 24, 2019.

US officials can keep gifts that are worth less than \$390 and must pay for the gifts that are above this amount. Moreover, the US Constitution does not permit accepting gifts from a foreign government under threat of penalty or impeachment.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) -

MERCER STREET TANKER ATTACK

- * The permanent delegations of the United Kingdom, Romania and the United States to NATO have submitted a joint protest to the Alliance over the recent attack on the Mercer Street tanker in the Gulf of Oman, the Romanian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday.
- * UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said he had discussed with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken the attack on the Mercer Street tanker and added that London and Washington condemn Iran for the incident.
- * Iran received no proof of its involvement in a recent attack on the Mercer Street tanker after it asked for evidence following accusations from Western countries, the Iranian embassy to the United Kingdom said on Wednesday.
- * Russia is still studying the details of the attack on the merchant vessel Mercer Street and sees a lot of conflicting information, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

LEBANON

- * Lebanese police in Beirut used tear gas and water cannons to disperse protesters from the streets adjacent to parliament and then used force after the demonstrators started throwing rocks at them, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Wednesday.
- * The head of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) Stefano Del Col urged Israel and Lebanon to cease fire and show maximum restraint after the rocket exchange between the two countries, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.
- * The United States is committing nearly \$100 million in additional aid for Lebanon, President Joe Biden said.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- * The United States has recently seen signs that Russia is committed to addressing cyber threats, White House Deputy National Security Advisor Anne Neuberger said on Wednesday.

MEXICO SUES US GUN MAKERS

- * The Mexican government filed a civil lawsuit against US gun manufacturers alleging negligent business practices contributed to illegal arms trafficking in Mexico, US media reported on Wednesday citing a document from the foreign ministry.

SYRIA ATTACK

* Militants from Turkish-controlled area attacked Syrian troops in the Aleppo Province by dropping a bomb from a drone and wounded five soldiers, Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria deputy head Vadim Kulit said on Wednesday.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* Temporary delays in the deliveries of the second component of Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V to foreign partners will be eliminated in August, and the vaccine's production will double in September, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said on Wednesday.

* Delaying the administration of coronavirus booster shots until late September to allow more countries to get vaccines represents a "false choice," White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

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UPDATE - US Government Approves \$134Mln AEGIS System Support Sale to Japan - Defense Agency

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration has approved two missiles–related arms sales to Japan worth a combined \$195 million, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced on Wednesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Japan of AEGIS Class Destroyer Support and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$134 million," the DSCA said in a press release.

The Department of State has also approved the possible Foreign Military Sale to Japan of RAM Block 2 Tactical Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$61.5 million, the DSCA said. The agency delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale on Wednesday, it said.

"The Government of Japan has requested to buy up to 44 Rolling Airframe Missiles (RAM) Block 2 Tactical Missiles, RIM-116C. Also included are RAM Block 2 Guidance Control Groups ...and storage containers," the DSCA said. The total estimated program cost was \$61.5 million, the agency said.

The AEGIS support systems sale will involve Follow-On Technical Support (FOTS) of AEGIS Class Destroyers, to include sustainment support and services, AEGIS computer software updates and system integration and its principal contractor will be Lockheed Martin of Moorestown, New Jersey, the release said.

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US Planning to Require Nearly All Foreign Visitors to be Fully Vaccinated - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is developing plans to require nearly all foreign nationals visiting the United States to be fully vaccinated against the novel coronavirus, Reuters reported on Wednesday.

The Delta variant of the novel coronavirus is believed to be the most prevalent and fastest-spreading mutation in the world albeit not as deadly. The variant was first reported in India in October 2020 and has already become the predominant strain in several countries, including the United States.

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Biden Suffers Double-Digit Dip in Support for COVID-19 Policies - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - Backing for US President Joe Biden's handling of the pandemic fell by more than 10 percentage points in July, although the president still enjoyed majority support, a Quinnipiac University poll said on Wednesday.

"With the Delta variant spreading and coronavirus cases once again spiking in the US, President Joe Biden maintains a positive grade on his handling of the coronavirus response as Americans approve 53 - 40 percent," a press release summarizing the poll said.

However, the latest survey shows a double-digit drop from a Quinnipiac poll in May, when Americans approved Biden's handling of the coronavirus response by a 65 - 30 percent margin, the release said.

The drop in support likely reflects a spike in US COVID-19 cases due to the Delta variant undercutting optimism in the spring, when cases fell and millions of Americans lined up for vaccinations each week, the release added.

"As the unvaccinated fall victim to the Delta variant, the 'turning the corner' optimism from the White House may be starting to ring premature," Quinnipiac Polling Analyst Tim Malloy said in the release.

On other issues, Biden receives a negative 43 - 48 percent approval rating on the economy, a split 42 - 44 percent approval on foreign policy and a negative 32-55 approval rating on his handling of gun violence, the release said.

The survey also asked whether Americans would be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who was endorsed by former President Donald Trump. Overall, 19 percent say they would be more likely to vote for the candidate, 41 percent less likely, and Trump's opinion made no difference for the remaining 37 percent, according to the release.

The survey queried 1,290 US adults nationwide from July 27 to August 2, with a margin of error of plus or minus 2.7 percentage points.

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Canadian Border Staff to Begin Strike on Friday - Unions

TORONTO, August 4 (Sputnik) - Canadian border agents and staff could begin job action as of Friday after talks with the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and the Treasury Board broke down, unions representing nearly 9,000 employees said on Wednesday.

The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and the Customs and Immigration Union (CIU) served the government of Canada a strike notice on Tuesday, according to a joint statement from the trade organizations, citing the lack of redress for "toxic" working conditions and the absence of contracts for unionized workers for over three years.

"We truly hoped we wouldn't be forced to take strike action, but we've exhausted every other avenue to reach a fair contract with the government," PSAC President Chris Aylward said in a statement. "Treasury Board and CBSA have been clear they aren't prepared to address critical workplace issues at CBSA at the bargaining table."

Throughout the potential strike, border services employees will be operating on a work-to-rule basis - only carrying out duties they were trained and mandated to do - at all Canadian airports, land borders, commercial shipping ports, postal facilities and headquarters locations.

The statement warned travelers to brace for long lineups and lengthy delays beginning on Friday, which could be accentuated by the influx of Americans, who will be allowed to enter Canada for discretionary purposes as of August 9.

The two sides will return to the negotiating table on August 6, however, should a deal not be reached quickly, striking action will begin at 6:00 a.m. local time (10 a.m. GMT).

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Sullivan Meets With Ukraine Officials to Discuss Zelenskyy Visit to US - White House

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with two senior Ukrainian officials to discuss President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to Washington later this month, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said on Wednesday.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met today with Head of Presidential Administration Andriy Yermak and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba of Ukraine. They discussed the upcoming visit of President Zelenskyy to Washington on August 30, which will highlight the breadth and depth of the US-Ukraine strategic partnership," Horne said in a statement.

Sullivan also spoke with ambassadors from the Bucharest Nine group, which is composed of Central and Eastern European countries, on Wednesday about energy security in the region. In particular, they discussed the Biden administration's measures to address the perceived risks of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

They likewise talked about Zelenskyy's upcoming visit to Washington, as well as concerns about Belarus and recent US-Russia engagement.

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Americans Without Guns More Likely to Back National Data Base to Track Weapons - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - US citizens who did not own guns are far more likely to support setting up a national data base to track them than registered weapon owners are, the Pew Research Center reported in a new poll on Wednesday.

"Non-owners are 31 percentage points more likely than gun owners to say they favor creating a federal database to track all gun sales (77 percent versus 46 percent) and there are similar sized gaps in opinion over banning high-capacity magazines and banning assault-style weapons," the Pew Research Center said.

The analysis is based on a survey that was conducted in April on Americans' attitudes about gun policy and on a June 2021 survey on gun ownership, the Pew Research Center said.

"The June 2021 survey, which was conducted June 14-27 among 10,606 adults, finds that 30 percent of adults say they own a gun, while another 11 percent say they personally do not own a gun but another member of their household does," it said.

Majorities of gun owners say they favor allowing concealed carry in more places and allowing teachers to carry guns in schools, but only about a third of non-owners support these policies, the Pew Research Center added.

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UN Security Council to Address Tanker Attack Off Oman Coast Friday Morning - Source

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will address on Friday morning the attack on Merchant Vessel Mercer Street off the coast of Oman, a diplomatic source in the Security Council told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"The maritime incident off Oman coast will be raised under Any Other Business agenda on Friday morning," the source said.

The closed meeting does not envision participation of any briefer on the incident, the source added.

Earlier, Liberia, Romania and the United Kingdom in a letter to the council called on the international community to condemn Iran for its alleged responsibility in the July 29 attack on the vessel in the Arabian Sea.

Israel, in a separate letter, called on the Security Council to sanction Iran for the attack.

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US Conducts Test of Directed Energy System in Wind Tunnel - Air Force

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The Arnold Engineering Development Complex (AEDC) has conducted a directed energy system test in a wind tunnel to study the possible impact of air flow on the setting during aircraft flight, the US Air Force said on Wednesday.

"There are a number of systems in use and being developed across the [Defense Department]. Integrating the DE [directed energy] systems on aircraft has obvious benefits, but also creates challenges, especially at higher speeds." AEDC official Rich Roberts said in a release.

Roberts explained there is a growing interest for directed energy systems within the Defense Department for a variety of purposes, especially for defending systems and personnel.

The test was conducted in the four-foot wind tunnel has become a culmination of about eight years of work of examining of how shockwaves created by an aircraft in the air affect the beam quality and effectiveness of a directed energy system during flight, the release said.

Directed energy systems use high-energy lasers or microwaves to degrade or destroy targets, the release added.

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US Government Approves \$134Mln AEGIS System Support Sale to Japan - Defense Agency
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"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Japan of AEGIS Class Destroyer Support and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$134 million," the DSCA said in a press release.

The government of Japan has requested to buy Follow-On Technical Support (FOTS) of AEGIS Class Destroyers, to include sustainment support and services; AEGIS computer software updates, system integration and testing, in-country and on-site engineering support, the release explained.

"The proposed sale is critical to ensure Japan Maritime Self Defense Force's (JMSDF) Aegis Destroyer fleet and the Japanese Computer Program Test Sites (JCPTS) remain ready to provide capabilities in the defense of Japan," the DSCA said.

The requested services will provide the JMSDF with software patches and adaptation data support that are vital to the effective and safe operations of the Aegis Combat Systems and the principal contractor will be Lockheed Martin Corporation of Moorestown, New Jersey, the release said.

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Sullivan Meets With Ukraine Officials to Discuss Zelenskyy Visit to US - White House

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Canadian Border Staff to Begin Strike on Friday – Union

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The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and the Customs and Immigration Union (CIU) served the government of Canada a strike notice on Tuesday, according to a joint statement from the trade organizations, citing the lack of redress for "toxic" working conditions and the absence of contracts for unionized workers for over three years.

"We truly hoped we wouldn't be forced to take strike action, but we've exhausted every other avenue to reach a fair contract with the government," Chris Aylward, Public Service Alliance of Canada national president, said in a statement. "Treasury Board and CBSA have been clear they aren't prepared to address critical workplace issues at CBSA at the bargaining table."

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Some US Border Patrol Agents Required to Wear Body Cameras to Enhance Transparency - CBP

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - Thousands of US Border Patrol agents will be issued body cameras as a means to enhance transparency of policing practices along the southwest and northern US borders, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said on Wednesday.

"US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has begun outfitting an initial group of agents and officers with body-worn cameras to better enhance its policing practices and reinforce trust and transparency," CBP said in the release.

CBP plans to issue some 6,000 cameras to Border Patrol agents along the US borders with Mexico and Canada by the end of this year, the release said.

The decision to issue body cameras to Border Patrol agents is a result of congressionally-mandated evaluation.

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US Believes Hijackers of Panama-Flagged Tanker in Gulf of Oman Iranian, Cannot Confirm

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The United States believes the individuals that hijacked a Panama-flagged vessel in the Gulf of Oman are Iranian but cannot confirm that information, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"What we can say now is that we can confirm that personnel have left the Panama-flagged Asphalt Princess - this commercial vessel that was seized yesterday," Price told reporters. "We believe that these personnel were Iranian, but we're not in a position to confirm this at this time."

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US Military Views Chinese Actions on Indian Border, in Xinjiang as Concerns - Commander

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The US views with concern China's actions at their border with India, as well as their treatment of Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region, head of US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral John Aquilino said on Wednesday.

"We certainly view with concern many of the actions that we've seen from Beijing... Those actions [in Hong Kong] were completely disconnected from the words from Beijing to adhere to the agreement that was in place. We see similar actions if you were to look at the border with India. We view that with concern," Aquilino said at the Aspen Security Forum. "If you look at the actions associated with the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the violations of dignity and respect and human rights, we view those actions with concern."

India and China agreed on Monday to hold further talks aimed at easing tensions and avoiding conflict along their contested border areas, the two countries' militaries said in a joint statement. Soldiers have been standing off along the border since April 2020.

However, on Wednesday India signaled its intention to play a greater role in countering China by deploying four warships, including a guided-missile destroyer and missile frigate, to the South China Sea in a show of solidarity towards what their navy called "friendly countries."

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US Senators Warn Polish Government Against Targeting Free Media – Statement

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) – A bipartisan group of US Senators, including Democrat Jeanne Shaheen and Republican Jim Risch, issued a warning to the Polish government against

alleged targeting of free media as well as jeopardizing of US media investments, according to a joint statement published on Wednesday.

"The Polish government's continued democratic backsliding, most recently through efforts designed to undermine independent media and one of the largest U.S. investments in the country, is deeply concerning. As a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators, we want to make clear to the Polish government that we are watching these events carefully," the statement said. In the statement, the senators notified their Polish counterparts that they are monitoring legislation under consideration in the parliament that is expected to discriminate against non-EU companies resulting in forcing out of Poland a major US investor employing several thousand people.

The senators noted that implementation of the new media laws will have negative implications for defense, business and trade relations between the United States and Poland.

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US Border Patrol Reports Unprecedented Surge of Brazilian Migrants Since April
WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) – Officers guarding one section of the Mexican border apprehended more than 7,000 migrants from Brazil this year, a more than 20-fold surge from 2020, the US Border Patrol said on Wednesday.

"Every month since April of 2021, SDC [San Diego Sector] has encountered more than 1,000 Brazilian nationals who entered the U.S. illegally," a Border Patrol press release said. Since fiscal 2021 began on October 1, 2020, SDC agents guarding the state of California's border with Mexico have apprehended more than 7,300 Brazilian nationals compared with 330 Brazilian nationals apprehended in all of fiscal year 2020, the release said.

The US is expected to report apprehensions of more than 200,000 migrants along the nation's entire 1,900-mile-long border in July, according to media reports.

If confirmed, the number would represent a modest increase from 189,000 migrants encountered in June, but a sharp reversal of a seasonal trend in which migration typically declines in the summer months, analysts say.

The Central American nations of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have provided the bulk of migrants thus far in the Biden administration.

However, media reports suggest the US border is increasingly attracting migrants from all over the world.

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Western Countries in UNSC Urge Russia to Reverse Recognition of Abkhazia, South Ossetia

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - Seven western countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom and France, in a joint statement on Wednesday called on Russia to reverse

its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and withdraw its military forces from the disputed territories.

"Today, we call once again on the Russian Federation to... withdraw its military and security forces without delay and reverse its recognition of the so-called independence of Georgia's territories Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, South Ossetia," the countries said in the statement, also supported by Estonia, Ireland, Norway and Albania, as an incoming member of the UN Security Council.

Estonia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Andre Lipand, who read out the statement, could not elaborate what the countries can do to achieve the withdrawal of Russian forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, considering that it has not happened since the onset of the conflict 13 years ago.

"We will continue to focus on this issue in the council, and we will not let it go without recourse," Lipand said when a reporter asked him a corresponding question.

Following a closed meeting of the Security Council on the issue on Wednesday, the western countries condemned Russia for its allegedly "illegal military presence" and exercising of control over Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, as well as the steps toward annexation of the regions.

In response, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said Moscow considered the meeting "phantom pain" being held against the background of the independent uprising in South Ossetia, which could not be ignored. South Ossetia, along with Abkhazia, declared independence from Georgia in August 2008 following an offensive of the Georgian army. The South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali was bombed, and a massive civilian flight from the region took place throughout the summer of that year.

Russia has backed South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where the majority of the population held Russian citizenship.

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US Condemns Attack on Afghan Defense Chief, Urges Taliban to End Violence - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the attack against Afghan Defense Minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi and urges the Taliban (banned in Russia) to halt its attacks, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We unequivocally condemn the targeted attack on Afghan Defense Minister Bismillah Mohammadi... the Taliban have claimed responsibility for this shameful act, the Taliban must stop this ongoing violence, they must stop it," Price told reporters.

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FBI Releases More Details About Pentagon Shooting Incident, Confirms Name of Attacker

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The FBI released on Wednesday additional details about the shooting incident outside the Defense Department building, including the exact time of the incident and the attacker's name.

On Tuesday, a Pentagon police officer died after being attacked by an unknown man outside the Pentagon building. The suspect was shot by the police and died at the scene. Later on Tuesday, Pentagon announced that the FBI was leading the investigation into the shooting.

"At approximately 10:40 a.m. on Tuesday, August 3, an individual exited a bus at the Pentagon Transit Center in Arlington, VA, and immediately, without provocation, attacked @PFPAOfficial (PFPA) Officer George Gonzalez with a knife, severely wounding him," the FBI tweeted.

Following a struggle, the attacker mortally wounded Officer Gonzalez and then shot himself with the officer's service weapon.

"The deceased subject has been identified as Austin William Lanz, 27, most recently of Acworth, GA. The #FBI continues to investigate the incident," the agency said.

A civilian bystander, who was also wounded during the incident, was taken to a hospital with non-life-threatening injuries and later discharged, the FBI added.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in a statement on Tuesday said the investigation is looking into the circumstances of the incident, adding that the probe must proceed unimpeded and without speculation. Austin extended his condolence to the family of the slain officer. Austin also ordered flags to be flown half-mast at the Pentagon.

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US Condemns Rocket Attacks on Israel by Armed Groups in Lebanon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns recent rocket attacks against Israel by armed groups in Lebanon, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We absolutely condemn the rocket attacks from armed groups based in Lebanon that were fired into Israel," Price told reporters.

Price said the United States will remain engaged with Israeli and Lebanese government officials to de-escalate the situation.

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Fed Should Be On Schedule to Raise US Rates by 2023 - Vice Chairman Clarida

WASHINGTON, Aug 4 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve should be on schedule to raise US interest rates by 2023 as employment and inflation could be within the central bank's targets by then, Vice Chairman Richard Clarida said Wednesday.

In a speech on the 'Outlooks, Outcomes, and Prospects for US Monetary Policy' issued by the Fed, Clarida said the prerequisites for raising rates were ensuring maximum employment among Americans, keeping inflation at 2 percent per annum and allowing that to moderately exceed 2 percent over time.

"I believe that these three necessary conditions for raising the target range for the federal funds rate will have been met by year-end 2022," he said, adding that "commencing policy normalization in 2023 would, under these conditions, be entirely consistent with our new flexible average inflation targeting framework."

His comments came after another Fed official — James Bullard, who is president the St. Louis chapter of the central bank — urged on Wednesday for a quicker hike of rates than in 2023. Bullard also said the Fed should stop buying bonds to support the US economy as inflation and growth were well above the central bank's expectations.

"We don't really need the asset acquisitions right now because there is so much recovery going on," Bullard had said in a live-streamed interview with the Washington Post.

The Fed has been buying at least \$80 billion of Treasury securities and \$40 billion of agency mortgage-backed securities monthly to support US economic recovery since the coronavirus outbreak 16 months ago. It has also kept US interest rates at a record low of between zero and 0.25 percent.

The US economy itself grew by an annualized rate of 6.5 percent in the second quarter of 2021, after a 3.5 percent contraction for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic.

At the close of the Fed's monthly policy meeting for July, Chairman Jerome Powell said it wasn't time for the central bank to discuss revision of either asset purchases or rates. He said focus should instead be on the Fed's mandates of trying to achieve maximum employment for Americans amid the economic recovery and ensuring inflation is sustained at 2 percent per annum and not more.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. More than 7 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

On the inflation side, the Fed's closely-followed core Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index — which excludes volatile food and energy prices — rose by 3.5 percent year-on-year in June for its fastest expansion in 30 years.

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US Supports UK Call For UNSC to Condemn Iran Tanker Attack - State Dept

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) – The United States supports London's call for the UN Security Council to denounce Tehran over the recent attack on the Mercer Street tanker, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We also do support the UK's call for a UN Security Council action against Iran in condemning the Mercer Street attack," Price said.

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Blinken, Raab Discuss Ongoing Efforts to Forge Coordinated Response to Iran - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab have discussed ongoing efforts to forge a coordinated response to Iran over the recent attack on the Mercer Street tanker off the coast of Oman in the Arabian Sea, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Wednesday. "Secretary Blinken had an opportunity today to speak to his British counterpart, Foreign Secretary Raab, and they spoke about ongoing efforts to forge a coordinated response to Iran's attack on Mercer Street," Price said.

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Israel Urges UN Security Council to Sanction Iran for Alleged Attack on Vessel - Letter

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - Israel called on the UN Security Council to impose sanctions against Iran for the alleged attack on the merchant vessel Mercer Street off the coast of Oman, while the United Kingdom, Liberia and Romania urged it to condemn the attack, the countries said in two separate letters seen by Sputnik on Wednesday.

"I call upon the Security Council to address this string of attacks with great urgency and unequivocally condemn and sanction Iran for these malign activities," Israel's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Gilad Erdan said in the letter, dated August 3.

Erdan said Mercer Street, managed by an Israeli company, was attacked by Iranian drones in the Arabian Sea on July 29, resulting in the death of one British and one Romanian citizen.

"The Security Council must take all necessary measures to hold the Iranian regime fully accountable for its repeated and unrestrained gross violations of international law," Erdan said.

Liberia, Romania and the United Kingdom, in another letter said they were conducting a thorough investigation into the attack and intended to update the Security Council on the findings in due course. They said initial assessments concluded that it is "highly likely" that the Liberia-flagged, Singapore-owned, UK-operated vessel was attacked by Iran using "one or more Unmanned Aerial Vehicles."

"We remain deeply concerned by such attacks that risk regional and international peace and security and believe this act must be condemned by the international community," the letter said.

The Iranian embassy to the United Kingdom said Tehran received no proof of its involvement in the attack after asking for evidence following accusations from the Western countries.

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White House Says Delaying Booster Shots for More Countries to Get Vaccines 'False Choice'

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - Delaying the administration of coronavirus booster shots until late September to allow more countries to get vaccines represents a "false choice," White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"We definitely feel that it's a false choice, and that we can do both," Psaki said when asked to comment on the World Health Organization's call to delay the administration of booster shots until September.

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UN Concerned By Lebanese Authorities Using Force Against Protesters - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned about the Lebanese police using force against peaceful protesters during the anniversary of the Beirut explosion, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"We stand in total solidarity with people of Lebanon and in particular the victims and families, some as you know were staff members of the United Nations. It is very important that there is a thorough and transparent investigation," Dujarric said. "But we have been concerned and we continue to be concerned at the force that we sometimes be seeing and we've seeing over the last year against peaceful protesters."

Earlier on Wednesday, a Sputnik correspondent reported that security forces in Beirut used tear gas and water cannons to push the protesters out of the streets adjacent to parliament. The police then used force after the demonstrators started throwing stones at them.

The protesters had taken to the streets on the first anniversary of the Beirut port blast and marched toward the Square of the Fallen and toward parliament, chanting anti-government slogans and calling for the resignation of political leaders.

"I think it's very important, and we've seen this before in Lebanon over the last year that security forces show restraint and allow people to demonstrate and express themselves peacefully," Dujarric said.

On August 4, a large explosion wiped out much of the Beirut port and surrounding neighborhoods, killing 280 people and injuring more than 6,000. The official investigation into the blast has failed to find out all the circumstances and identify the responsible individuals.

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Biden Believes Cuomo Should Resign to Leave Space for Future Leaders - White House

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden believes New York Governor Andrew Cuomo should resign to leave space for future leaders, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

The investigation into sexual abuse allegations against Cuomo - sanctioned by New York State Attorney General Letitia James - concluded on Tuesday that he harassed multiple women in violation of state and federal law. The investigation also revealed that Cuomo and a senior aide attempted to retaliate against the victims.

"The president made clear yesterday that governor Cuomo should resign," Psaki said. "The president believes that Governor Cuomo should do the right thing - resign - and leave space for future leadership in New York."

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UN Concerned About Safety of Afghan Civilians Trapped by Fighting - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is deeply concerned about the safety of thousands of civilians trapped in the fighting in the city of Lashkar Gah in southern Afghanistan, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We're deeply concerned about the safety and protection of people in Lashkar Gah, in the south, where tens of thousands of people who have been trapped by the fighting," Dujarric said.

"Our humanitarian colleagues also tell us that in Helmand, in Kandahar, they are reporting increased civilian casualties, destruction or damage to civilian houses, as well as to critical infrastructure, including hospitals. Hospitals and health workers are becoming overwhelmed by the number of wounded people," the spokesman added.

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US Charges 9 in Gun Trafficking Scheme That Supplied New York City - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - Nine defendants face charges in a gun-running network that purchased firearms in the US state of Georgia and sold the weapons in New York City, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"The individuals named in the indictment are alleged to have participated in a trafficking scheme which flooded our New York City Streets with illegal firearms," the Justice Department Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) Special Agent John DeVito said in a press release.

Three of the defendants were arrested earlier on Wednesday, three were previously charged and the remaining three remain at large, the release said.

The group included a straw purchaser who bought at least 87 firearms from at least six federal firearms licensees in Georgia, the release added.

Most of the guns were transported by bus, to New York City for resale, often to the "Blixy Gang" of aspiring rap musicians. Some of the guns later appeared in music videos showing gang members brandishing firearms and displaying stacks of cash, according to the release.

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UNIFIL Chief Urges Israel, Lebanon to Cease Fire Amid Rocket Exchange - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - The Head of the UN Mission and Force Commander of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Major General Stefano Del Col, urged Israel and Lebanon to cease fire and show maximum restraint after the rocket exchange between the two countries, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

Dujarric said earlier in the day, UNIFIL received reports that at least two rockets had been fired from Lebanon towards Israel, followed by the Israeli Defense Forces responding with artillery fire.

"UNIFIL's head of mission and force commander Major General Stefano Del Col was in immediate touch with the parties. He urged them to cease fire and to exercise maximum restraint and to avoid further escalation," Dujarric said.

"UNIFIL remains fully engaged with the parties through our liaison and coordination channels. It is imperative to restore stability immediately so that UNIFIL can begin an investigation," the spokesman added.

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US Crude Oil Stockpiles Rise Again as Summer Demand Wanes - Energy Agency

NEW YORK, August 4 (Sputnik) - US crude oil stockpiles increased last week after an unusually large drop in exports, according to data from the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) that suggests waning demand for energy toward the end of the summer. US commercial crude oil inventories rose by 3.6 million barrels in the week to July 20 to 439.2 million barrels, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report released on Wednesday. Analysts polled by US media had expected a drawdown of 3.1 million barrels instead. Inventories increased as US crude exports fell below the long-breached 2 million barrels per day mark to reach 1.9 million barrels during the week to July 20 from the 2.4 million barrels noted in the week to July 13.

It was only the second time in 11 weeks that the EIA had reported a build in crude stocks. The other nine weeks of drawdowns had taken almost 50 million barrels off the market.

Gasoline inventories also fell by 5.292 million barrels last week, the EIA said, compared with analysts' expectations for a 1.780 million-barrel draw.

The weekly build in crude suggested that demand for energy might be slowing as the novel coronavirus Delta variant cases have increased again, according to analysts who also noted that gasoline consumption could decline hereon as schools and colleges reopen in the United States.

"The Delta variant is slowly beginning to make a negative impact on global energy demand," John Kilduff, founding partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, told Sputnik. "Also, last week was probably one of the last few hurrahs for kids who'd be returning to schools and colleges in the US soon. So it isn't surprising that you had an unusually large drawdown in gasoline."

Oil prices continued their decline for a fourth straight day on the EIA data, with US crude prices falling below the key \$70 per barrel support.

By noon (16:00 GMT), West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude, the benchmark for US oil, was down \$2.44, or 2.4 percent, at \$68.12 per barrel. WTI has lost 4.5 percent in three previous sessions. London's Brent, the global benchmark for oil, was down \$1.97, or 2.7 percent, at \$70.44. Brent lost 4 percent in three previous sessions.

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Russia Does Not See Any Role for UN Security Council in Abkhazia, S. Ossetia - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - Russia does not see any role for the UN Security Council in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday.

"I want to draw your attention to the facts that our Western colleagues unfortunately once again raised as any other business - the question of the events in Tskhinvali in 2008," Polyanskiy said. "We consider this to be only their phantom pain and independent Abkhazia and South Ossetia is a reality that cannot be ignored. I want to stress that Russian-Abkhazian and Russian-South Ossetian cooperation long ago became a stabilization factor in the South Caucasus and we don't see any role for Security Council in this region."

Polyanskiy stressed that Russia considers it important that Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia continue their discussions in Geneva to find a legal formula for their mutual commitments on non-use of force and for resolution of other urgent matters.

"It should become a reliable guarantee of non-recurrence of Georgian military adventures which were indirectly encouraged by some of our western partners in 2008," he said. "The criminal acts that were committed by Saakashvili regime like the bombing of sleeping Tskhinval should not repeat."

Polyanskiy also pointed out that Russia is concerned by Tbilisi's continued policy for accelerated Euro-Atlantic integration as well as of this country joining the plans of the US and NATO on the containment of Russia.

"To conclude, I would like to stress that in Russia we always distinguished between the criminal regime of Mikhail Saakashvili and Georgian people," he said. "We are ready to Normal relations with our two countries to the degree to which Georgia's side is ready to that. And we also hope that common sense will prevail in Tbilisi and our Georgian partners will build relations with their neighbors taking into due respect the balance of interests."

South Ossetia, along with another breakaway region, Abkhazia, declared independence from Georgia in August 2008 following an offensive of the Georgian army. The South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali was bombed, and a massive civilian flight from the region took place throughout the summer of that year.

Russia has backed South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where the majority of the population held Russian citizenship. Other countries that have recognized the self-proclaimed republics include Nauru, Nicaragua, Syria, Venezuela, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Georgia, and much of the world, never recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and continues to consider them an occupied part of its own territory.

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Mexico Sues American Gun Companies in US Court, Claims Negligent Practices - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The Mexican government filed a civil lawsuit against US gun manufacturers alleging negligent business practices contributed to illegal arms trafficking in Mexico, court documents revealed on Wednesday.

The lawsuit includes six US-based manufacturers, which the government says manufacture the guns that are most recovered in Mexico: Smith & Wesson, Beretta, Century Arms, Colt, Glock and Ruger.

"Plaintiff Estados Unidos Mexicanos [Mexico], a sovereign nation, brings this action to put an end to the massive damage that the Defendants cause by actively facilitating the unlawful trafficking of their guns to drug cartels and other criminals in Mexico. Almost all guns recovered at crime scenes in Mexico - 70 percent to 90 percent of them - were trafficked from the United States," the lawsuit said.

The lawsuit also targets US gun manufacturer Barrett because its 0.5 caliber sniper rifle is a weapon widely used among the Mexican drug cartels. In addition, the lawsuit goes after a US wholesale gun store called Interstate Arms from the US state of Massachusetts that allegedly sells most of the firearms listed in the complaint for re-sale to gun dealers throughout the United States.

The lawsuit said the Mexican government and Mexican citizens have been victims of the military-style guns that are trafficked from the United States into Mexico.

US gun manufacturers are capable of preventing illegal arms trafficking but they refuse to take action because profit from the criminal gun market in Mexico, the lawsuit added.

The Mexican government wants regulations to be put in place that will prevent arms trafficking into Mexico and compensation for damages the illegal trade has caused in Mexico, according to the lawsuit.

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Blinken's Deputy Discusses Myanmar Aid With Exiled Gov't Foreign Minister - State Dept

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman discussed humanitarian aid to Myanmar, also known as Burma, with exiled National Unity Government (NUG) member Zin Mar Aung, the Department of State announced on Wednesday.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman spoke with Burmese (Myanmar) NUG representative Zin Mar Aung today," the State Department said in a readout. "(T)hey discussed efforts to combat rising COVID-19 infections in Burma and to provide critical humanitarian assistance to the people of Burma."

Aung is acting Minister of Foreign Affairs in Myanmar's exiled National Unity Government, which opposes the military government of the country.

She and Sherman also "discussed ongoing efforts to return Burma to a path to democracy, including continued US support for the pro-democracy movement," the readout said.

Also on Wednesday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken called on the Foreign Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Myanmar is a member, to act to restore democracy in that country.

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Russia Still Studying Details of Attack on Tanker Off Oman Coast - Deputy Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - Russia is still studying the details of the attack on Merchant Vessel Mercer Street off the coast of Oman and sees a lot of conflicting information on the incident, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday.

The Liberia flagged, Singapore-owned and UK-operated vessel was attacked on July 29 in the Arabian Sea that resulted in the death of one British and one Romanian national and physical damage to the vessel. Israel, the United Kingdom, Liberia and Romania in two two separate letters to the UN Security Council said they believed Iran was responsible for the attack. Iran, in turn, said it received no proof of its involvement in the attack.

"We're still studying the details. There is a lot of conflicting information, a lot of highly likely analysis, which we totally reject," Polyanskiy told reporters. "We need to establish facts, we need to see and we don't need to rush to any conclusions or actions without having proofs of what has happened."

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Russia Does Not See Any Role for UN Security Council in Abkhazia, S. Ossetia - Envoy to UN UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - Russia does not see any role for the UN Security Council in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday.

"I want to draw your attention to the facts that our Western colleagues unfortunately once again raised as any other business - the question of the events in Tskhinvali in 2008," Polyanskiy said. "We consider this to be only their phantom pain and independent Abkhazia and South Ossetia is reality that cannot be ignored. I want to stress that Russian-Abkhazian and Russian-South Ossetian cooperation long ago became stabilization factor in the South Caucasus and we don't see any role for Security Council in this region."

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Senate Foreign Relations Committee Passes Bill Revoking Iraq Military Force Authorization

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday passed a resolution that would repeal the 1991 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMFs) against Iraq.

The resolution, entitled "a joint resolution to repeal the authorizations for use of military force against Iraq," passed the committee by a vote of 14-8. It will now move on to the full Senate for consideration.

The committee heard from administration officials in both public and classified hearings in the days leading up to the vote, during which time they were told that repealing the AUMFs would not hinder any current US operations in the country.

Senator Ted Cruz was unsuccessful in his attempt to add an amendment to the resolution that would clarify the president's Article II powers to use military force to protect American lives. He argued that the amendment would prevent the Biden administration from claiming lack of authority to act against Iran should they need to.

The resolution is being considered amid a drawdown of US combat forces in Iraq, which Biden announced would be out of the country by the end of this year. During a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the two leaders stated that US forces in the country are there at the invitation of the Iraqi government, and that their new focus will be to support and train local soldiers to fight the Islamic State (banned in Russia).

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Mexico Sues American Gun Companies in US Court, Claims Negligent Practices - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The Mexican government filed a civil lawsuit against US gun manufacturers alleging negligent business practices contributed to illegal arms trafficking in Mexico, Reuters reported on Wednesday citing a document from the foreign ministry. The lawsuit targets Smith and Wesson; Barrett Firearms; Colt's Manufacturing Company; Sturm, Ruger and Co.; Glock Inc.; and others, the report said.

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IMF Chief Says Special Drawing Rights Will Not Fix Lebanon Longer-Term Structural Problems

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - Special drawing rights (SDRs) will not solve Lebanon's long-term structural problems and the country needs a government empowered to reform the economy in order to address them, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Wednesday.

"But the SDRs are not going to fix Lebanon's longer-term structural, systemic problems. What do we need for that? We need a government that is empowered to reform and revitalize Lebanon's crippled economy," Georgieva stated.

Georgieva said the government must first tackle head-on the fundamental problem of weak governance by strengthening anti-corruption measures, improving the performance of state functions and completing an audit of the central bank and the electricity provider.

"Second, implement a fiscal strategy, combining deep debt restructuring and reforms to restore credibility of the country," she added.

The IMF chief said Lebanon should also pursue a comprehensive restructuring of the financial sector as it needs a credible monetary and exchange rate system supported by unification of exchange rates.

"So for us, for the IMF, there is the urgency to act today, and the importance of a longer-term transformation of the Lebanese economy. On the urgency to act," she said. "We do now have the August 2 vote of our Board of Governors for the \$650 billion new SDR allocation, to be distributed in a couple of weeks according to quota shares. For Lebanon, this is not trivial. Lebanon would receive about \$860 million of SDRs at this critical moment to strengthen the country's depleted reserves and also to help with the many urgent needs of the Lebanese people."

Georgieva said the SDRs are a precious resource that must be deployed for the maximum benefit of the country and its people.

"How to use SDRs, of course, is a sovereign decision - but it must be a good decision. The Lebanese people have the right to know what are these SDRs going to do for them – and I call upon our international and domestic partners: work with us to help ensure transparency and accountability of the deployment of Lebanon's new SDRs allocation," she said

However, Georgieva pointed that a broader political, social and economic reform has not taken place and, on the contrary, a dramatic deterioration in the living conditions can be observed.

"Over the past year, we have been available for the Lebanese authorities, but let me be very honest: engagement is severely constrained by the absence of an effective government. So, let me again urge Lebanon's political leaders to coalesce around a new government that has the will and the mandate to implement reforms," she said.

Last week, Najib Mikati, who has served as prime minister in the past, was authorized by the Lebanon's parliament and president to form a government. Since 2019, Lebanon has suffering a deep economic crisis with the national currency having lost more than 80 percent of its value and the population facing shortages of fuel and other commodities.

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US Seeing Commitment From Russia to Solve Cyber Threat Problem - White House

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has recently seen signs that Russia is committed to addressing cyber threats, White House Deputy National Security Advisor Anne Neuberger said on Wednesday.

Neuberger noted that Russian government officials including the head of the FSB have expressed interest in partnering with Washington to address cybercriminals.

"The proof will be in the pudding. We're looking to see the changes in addressing disruptive cyber activity over time. But we think we're seeing a commitment. We will look to see the actions that follow up on that commitment, and as we said, we view this in a bidirectional way, and we are prepared to act as well if issues are highlighted to us about cyber activities," White House Deputy National Security Advisor Anne Neuberger said at an event hosted by the Aspen Security Forum.

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Biden Pledges \$100Mln in Additional Aid for Lebanon, Urges Reforms

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is committing nearly \$100 million in additional aid for Lebanon, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.

"Today I'm announcing nearly a \$100 million in new humanitarian assistance," Biden told a United Nations pledging conference for the crisis-ridden nation led by France.

Biden used the donor conference, which was convened on the anniversary of the devastating blast in the Port of Beirut, to urge the Lebanese government to pursue much-needed reforms.

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Pentagon Police Officer Killed on Tuesday Identified as 3-Year Veteran George Gonzalez
WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon police officer killed on Tuesday morning has been identified as three-year war veteran George Gonzalez, the building's protection agency said on Wednesday.

"Last night, the Pentagon Force Protection Agency observed End of Watch for Pentagon Police Officer George Gonzalez who was tragically killed yesterday during the incident at the Pentagon bus platform," the Pentagon Force Protection Agency said via Twitter.

Gonzalez had also served in the US Army and was an Iraq war veteran, the agency said. The agency described Gonzalez, a New York native, as well-liked and respected by his colleagues.

On Tuesday, Pentagon Police Chief Woodrow Kusse said a Pentagon police officer was attacked on the metro bus platform outside the Defense Department building and gunfire was exchanged, resulting in several casualties. He said they are not looking for any additional suspects and there is not continuing threat, but the investigation is ongoing.

The Associated Press on Tuesday identified the deceased suspect as Austin William Lanz, 27, of the US state of Georgia. The report said Lanz ambushed Gonzalez, stabbing him in the neck before other officers were able to shoot and killed him.

The report noted, according to sources, Lanz enlisted in the US Marine Corps in 2012 but was "administratively separated" less than a month later. However, Lanz's motive remains unclear.

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Half of US Small Businesses Plan to Require Employee Coronavirus Vaccinations - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - Company-mandated coronavirus vaccine requirements for employees have become a popular option for US small businesses, half of which plan to require jobs for workers and a third plan to require customers without face masks to prove they have been inoculated, a new American Express poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Nearly one in five of all small businesses (19 percent) said they were '100 percent certain' they would require non-remote employees to be vaccinated, while 31 percent said they would 'likely' require it," a press release explaining the poll said.

When asked if they would require customers to show proof of vaccination to shop in their store without wearing a mask, 34 percent said yes, the release added.

The survey of 550 small business leaders was commissioned by Kabbage, an American Express company, and conducted between May 27 and June 24.

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Syria Fails to Grant Visas to OPCW Assessment Team - UK Envoy to UN

WASHINGTON, August 4(Sputnik) - Syria has failed to grant visas to the members of the assessment team of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Barbara Woodward, current Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations said on Wednesday.

"We note the ongoing failure to grant visas to members of the declaration assessment team. This is unacceptable. Syria is required to give immediate and unfettered access to OPCW personnel including members of the declaration assessment team," Woodward said at a UN Security Council meeting.

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Blinken Expresses 'Grave Concern' Over Military Rule in Myanmar – State Department

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed "grave concern" over military rule in Myanmar, also known as Burma and urged the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to act to restore democracy there, the Department of State said on Wednesday,

"[Blinken] expressed grave concerns about the military coup in Burma [Myanmar] and called on ASEAN to take joint action to urge the military to end the violence, release all those unjustly detained, and restore Burma's path to democracy," State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout.

Blinken delivered his message on Tuesday to the ASEAN foreign ministers and the group's Secretary General Lim Jock Hoi during the US-ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting, Price said. "The Secretary and ASEAN foreign ministers discussed pressing regional and international challenges, including combatting the COVID-19 pandemic, acting boldly against the climate crisis, strengthening human capital development, and the urgency of action on Burma," the readout said.

Blinken also reaffirmed the United States' commitment to ASEAN centrality and support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific as part of the US vision for a free and open region, Price said.

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OPCW Plans to Conduct 2 Rounds of Inspections in Syria - UN Disarmament Official

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is expected to hold two rounds of inspections in scientific and research facilities in Syria, Thomas Markram, UN Office for Disarmament Affairs Director Thomas Markram said on Wednesday.

"I have been advised that the OPCW Technical Secretariat still plans to conduct two rounds of inspections of the Baza and Jumeriah facilities are the Syrian scientific studies and research center in 2021, Markram said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

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US Central Bank Should Stop Asset Buying as 'So Much Recovery Is Going On' - Fed's Bullard

WASHINGTON, Aug 4 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve should stop buying bonds to support the US economy as inflation and growth is well above the central bank's expectations, St. Louis Fed President James Bullard said Wednesday.

Pushing for the so-called taper theory that demands a cut or stop altogether of the Fed's monthly \$120 billion asset purchase, Bullard said inflation had already overshoot the central bank's 2 percent per annum target and should stabilize at 2.5 percent to 3 percent in 2022. "We don't really need the asset acquisitions right now because there is so much recovery going on," the St. Louis Fed President said in a live-streamed interview with the Washington Post. The Fed has been buying at least \$80 billion of Treasury securities and \$40 billion of agency mortgage-backed securities monthly to support US economic recovery since the coronavirus outbreak 16 months ago. It has also kept US interest rates at a record low of between zero and 0.25 percent.

The US economy itself grew by an annualized rate of 6.5 percent in the second quarter of 2021, after a 3.5 percent contraction for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic.

At the close of the Fed's monthly policy meeting for July, Chairman Jerome Powell said it wasn't time for the central bank to discuss revision of either asset purchases or rates. He said focus should instead be on the Fed's mandates of trying to achieve maximum employment for Americans amid the economic recovery and ensuring inflation is sustained at 2 percent per annum and not more.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. More than 7 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

On the inflation side, the Fed's closely-followed core Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index — which excludes volatile food and energy prices — rose by 3.5 percent year-on-year in June for its fastest expansion in 30 years.

Bullard said in his opinion, long-term interest rates were being pushed lower by purchases of mortgage-backed securities as well as Treasury securities.

"By taking asset purchases off the table, the Fed would be free to examine the situation in the first half of next year," he said. "You must begin thinking differently about where we will be in 2022."

While Powell and Bullard both belong to the Fed's Federal Open Market Committee, it is not uncommon for members of the policy-making panel to have differences in opinion on the economy and inflation.

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Coronavirus Delta Variant Accounts for 93.4% of All New Cases in US - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - The novel coronavirus Delta variant accounts for more than 93 percent of all new cases in the United States marking, according to the new data published by the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention on Wednesday.

The new data shows over the second half of July, the prevalence of the Delta variant along with its sub-lineages reached 93.4 percent, while in the region of the United States encompassing Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska, it reached 98.4 percent.

The Delta variant replaced the Alpha variant (B.1.1.7) as the most dominant coronavirus strain in the United States within two months, the CDC data revealed.

The Delta variant of the novel coronavirus is believed to be the most prevalent and fastest spreading mutation in the world albeit not as deadly. The variant was first reported in India in October 2020 and has already become the predominant strain in a number of countries, including the United States.

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UN Security Council Considering Meeting Friday To Address Afghanistan Violence - Source

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is considering the possibility of holding a meeting this Friday to address the escalating violence in Afghanistan, a diplomatic source in the Security Council told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"The council is trying to work out the logistics if a meeting is possible on Friday," the source said.

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Blinken, Sudanese PM Agree to Encourage Sides of Ethiopian Conflict to Enter Peace Talks

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok in a phone call agreed to encourage the parties to the Ethiopian conflict to enter talks aimed at reaching a ceasefire, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price revealed in a readout on Wednesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok to discuss shared concerns over the expansion of armed confrontation in the Amhara and Afar regions of Ethiopia, the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Tigray region, and

reports of Eritrean troops re-entering Ethiopia, all of which impact regional stability," Price said. "Secretary Blinken and PM Hamdok agreed to encourage all parties to enter negotiations toward a ceasefire, to engage in an inclusive political dialogue to preserve the unity and integrity of the Ethiopian state, and to allow full humanitarian access to those in need."

Blinken and Hamdok also discussed progress in Sudan's democratic transition as well as about boosting U.S.-Sudanese ties, Price added.

Clashes in the province of Tigray erupted in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party — the Tigray People's Liberation Front — of ambushing a regional army post to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia. Since then, the Ethiopian military has occupied the Tigray region, resulting in fighting with rebels, which has caused severe humanitarian challenges.

An estimated two million of Tigray's six million people are reported to have fled their homes, and an estimated 900,000 people are likely experiencing famine conditions. In addition, about 33,000 severely malnourished children are projected to face imminent risk of death if more aid is not forthcoming to the people of Tigray.

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UNICEF Says Outraged By Report of Anti-Government Group Flogging Boy in Afghanistan

UNITED NATIONS, August 4 (Sputnik) - UNICEF is alarmed by the escalating violence against children in Afghanistan and is outraged by a report of an anti-government group flogging a teenage boy, UNICEF Afghanistan Representative Herve Ludovic De Lys said in a statement on Wednesday.

"UNICEF is extremely concerned about the escalation of violence against children in Afghanistan and is outraged by a report that a 12-year-old boy from Shirin Tagab district, Kohsaiyyad village, in Faryab province, suffered a brutal flogging by a member of an anti-government element," De Lys said.

De Lys noted that the flogged boy endured wounds to his back, legs and feet and is traumatized by the event.

"UNICEF, with local partners, is providing urgent help to the child and his family, including psychosocial support, medical care as well as other immediate needs," De Lys said. "In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international humanitarian laws to which Afghanistan is a signatory, all children should be protected. UNICEF urges all parties to conflict to keep children safe and respect their rights."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Almost 60% of New York Residents Say Governor Cuomo Should Resign - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - Nearly two-thirds of New York State residents say Governor Andrew Cuomo should resign over the sexual harassment accusations leveled against him in a state-sanctioned investigation, according to a new Marist poll released on Wednesday.

"In a poll conducted last night, 59 percent of New Yorkers, including 52 percent of registered Democrats, say New York Governor Andrew Cuomo should resign from office in light of the results of an independent investigation which found Cuomo sexually harassed multiple women, including state employees," the poll said.

On Tuesday, New York State Attorney General Letitia James said the months-long investigation into allegations against Cuomo concluded that he harassed multiple women, including younger colleagues, in violation of state and federal law. The investigation also revealed that he and a senior aide attempted to retaliate against the victims.

President Joe Biden, a fellow Democrat and long-time political ally of the governor, has led calls by a growing number of lawmakers and party officials that Cuomo must resign.

The poll found that 32 percent of New York residents felt Cuomo should serve out the remainder of his term, which ends in November 2022 and 7 percent said they believe he did nothing wrong.

If Cuomo does not resign, then 59 percent of residents - the same percentage who say he should step down - said they feel he should be impeached and forcibly removed by the New York State's legislative assembly.

Cuomo denies the allegations of wrongdoing and inappropriate conduct, claiming that the investigation weaponized his "everyday interactions."

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Trump Challenges Justice Dept. Order to Release Tax Documents - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, August 4 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said that the requests of the US House Committee for his tax returns are unlawful, a court filing said on Wednesday.

"The requests single out President Trump because he is a Republican and a political opponent. They were made to retaliate against President Trump," the filing said.